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City Hall's new 'in' crowd of lobbyists

Lobbyists behind the campaigns of ascendant power brokers are now poised to cash in.

[Chris Bragg](#)



Buck Ennis

Vincent Pitta, Robert Bishop and Jon Del Giorno (from left) are lobbyists that can benefit from the city's upended political order.

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In a packed Bronx auditorium one recent evening, hundreds of locals gathered to celebrate the election of the first Latina City Council speaker, Melissa Mark-Viverito, repeatedly chanting "*¡Sí, se puede!*" For the lobbyists in the crowd who helped pave her path to victory, that might as well be the new mantra when it comes to signing clients.

In the city's radically new political order, even the so-called permanent government will see a shift. And lobbyists' reputed closeness to Mayor Bill de Blasio, Ms. Mark-Viverito and other ascendant power brokers will often determine who gets business.

"I wish I could say getting clients was really about the right strategy, or knowledge, or having the right team,"

said one top practitioner. "But a lot of it is the perception of your relationships with elected officials."

Others in the industry agreed. "Anytime a story is written saying a lobbyist is close to a politician, they raise their rates," said Ken Fisher, a lobbyist at Cozen O'Connor and a former councilman.

After the 12-year reign of Mayor Michael Bloomberg—who never had to raise a cent for his campaigns—lobbyists expect to have more input in the de Blasio administration, which has promised to be more inclusive. That could make their services more valuable.

"Bloomberg did a lot of stuff in a vacuum—he was isolated. I think Bill de Blasio will listen to people, whether it's lobbyists or anyone else," said Sid Davidoff, a longtime lobbyist at Davidoff Hutcher and Citron.

One oddity of the lobbyists' world is that those who benefit most from the impression that they have allies in high places publicly insist it doesn't help them influence government. Among them is Mr. Davidoff, an early de Blasio backer and longtime friend whom insiders view as one of the big winners of

the 2013 elections.

That dynamic can cut both ways, he said. Mr. Davidoff was a regular tennis partner and close adviser of then-Mayor David Dinkins in the early 1990s, when his firm topped the closely watched annual rankings of the highest-earning city lobbying shops. That was used against Mr. Dinkins during his failed 1993 re-election bid.

"I was viciously attacked by Rudy Giuliani's campaign for being close to David Dinkins, but somehow I continued to do just fine when Giuliani was mayor," said Mr. Davidoff, whose firm was ranked 10th in 2012 with \$1.6 million in city lobbying revenue. "It's not access to power that matters. It's the expertise to navigate through government."

Thriving relationships

A very cozy relationship

Many [lobbying firms such as Pitta Bishop Del Giorno & Giblin](#) are now political campaign consultants, a practice that can be controversial.

A reputation for closeness to decision makers can be detrimental because of the bad press it brings, Mr. Davidoff insisted. Most of the bigger, established lobbying firms have such broad relationships that they thrive regardless of who is elected. Still, Mr. Davidoff acknowledges that links to lawmakers can be helpful in landing clients—and in getting calls to elected officials returned.

Another big winner of 2013 made a similar argument. Jon Del Giorno, sitting in his firm's 28th-floor conference room a few blocks from City Hall, downplayed the notion that his closeness with Ms. Mark-Viverito will help his firm, Pitta Bishop Del Giorno & Giblin, which has hovered near the bottom of, or just out of, the top-10 list.

"I really don't think there's a difference," he said, rattling off a long list of elected officials, unions, business interests and nonprofits represented by the firm. "We've been steady in our relationships."

Pitta Bishop has done Ms. Mark-Viverito's election-law compliance since 2005, and last year Mr. Del Giorno quarterbacked her uphill speaker bid. In a clever and unprecedented move, the firm set up a 2017 campaign account for an unspecified office with the state Board of Elections, which allowed Ms. Mark-Viverito to raise \$100,000 and hire a full staff for her run, despite needing just 26 votes from council colleagues to win.

More than \$21,000 of the money reportedly came from Pitta Bishop's long roster of business and labor clients, and gave Ms. Mark-Viverito an edge over her rivals. Common Cause New York said the new speaker was "exploiting" the state's lax campaign-finance system.

But the move was entirely legal and vetted by the city's Campaign Finance Board, Mr. Del Giorno said. "If there was [another] mechanism to do it, we would have done it with that vehicle," said Mr. Del Giorno, a former longtime city Board of Elections official. "There isn't any."

Since Ms. Mark-Viverito became speaker in January, Mr. Del Giorno has continued to play a role for her, setting up an "appointments committee" to vet applicants for City Council staff positions, according to multiple sources. But he insists the firm will not get any special favors from the speaker. "You know Melissa, her personality—she's very independent, and she's very careful about conflicts," said Mr. Del Giorno. Pitta Bishop also has a good reputation among many political insiders.

Another operative on the winning side of last year's elections, Scott Levenson, president of the Advance Group, is close to Ms. Mark-Viverito and also curried favor with the de Blasio camp by organizing a \$1 million campaign that helped sink the mayoral bid of former Council Speaker Christine Quinn. Since then, new clients have come calling: For instance, lobbying records show that last fall, Pledge 2 Protect, a well-funded group trying to persuade Mr. de Blasio to cancel a waste-transfer station project on the Upper East Side, retained Advance.

But the firm has also been the subject of negative stories about its whirlwind of activity during the 2013 races, triggering an investigation of possible campaign-finance infractions. Ms. Mark-Viverito announced during the speaker race that she would stop taking free advice from the firm, though her relationship with Mr. Levenson is said to be intact. "Hiring them right now is the ultimate double-edged sword," said one labor official, referring to the firm's successes and controversies.

Other beneficiaries

Others poised to prosper in the wake of the mayoral and speaker elections include BerlinRosen, a liberal shop that helped run Mr. de Blasio's campaign, although the public-relations firm does not directly lobby lawmakers and does not publicly disclose its activities.

Another early backer of Mr. de Blasio was James Capalino, of the second-ranked firm Capalino+Co., whose senior vice president, George Fontas, did extensive volunteer field organizing for the de Blasio campaign. The firm earned \$3.3 million in fees from city lobbying in 2012.

Michael Woloz, of the firm Connelly McLaughlin & Woloz, who represents the taxi industry, bundled nearly \$235,000 in campaign contributions for Mr. de Blasio, more than double anyone else's haul. And Luis Miranda of the MirRam Group enjoys a close relationship with Ms. Mark-Viverito.

Meanwhile, firms close to the Queens Democratic Party—such as the ninth-ranked Parkside Group, which runs the campaigns of many Queens-backed candidates and earned \$1.7 million from city lobbying in 2012—could find the speaker's office less friendly than when it was ruled by Ms. Quinn, who owed her position in large part to Queens Democrats. Last year was the first time a speaker race was decided without the organization supplying votes, and spoils of victory—key staff positions and committee chairmanships—mostly went elsewhere.

Parkside also ran a controversial \$8 million campaign funded by the real estate industry last year targeting City Council races. The negativity of some of its mailers rankled officials who have since emerged as power brokers, such as Brooklyn Councilman Brad Lander.

One well-known lobbyist and active supporter of Ms. Quinn was Emily Giske of Bolton-St. John's, the city's fourth-ranked lobbying firm in 2012 with \$2.4 million in fees. Still, industry veterans don't expect major firms on the losing side of the 2013 races to take up collection plates just yet. The top tier still has scores of important clients whom power brokers must heed.

Moreover, city government has fundamentally changed over the years, according to veteran consultant and lobbyist Hank Sheinkopf, to the point where even the best--connected lobbyists still must make strong cases to persuade close allies.

"Winning gives you bragging rights—and new clients that still believe the fix is in. But that's not how things work anymore," said Mr. Sheinkopf, whose close relationship with Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver drew scrutiny several years ago amid a racino bidding probe. "Does it help to have those relationships? The answer is yes. But you still have to convince people on the merits."

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